Sell Your Soul to the Devil

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/18159722.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Categories:	Gen, M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Mischa Lecter, Matthew Brown, Jack Crawford, Frederick Chilton, Alana Bloom
Additional Tags:	Will dies... again, Hannibal brings him back though don't worry, Decapitation, further explanations of the after life, sorry if that bogs down the story, siblings being siblings, Alana is trying too hard to be a good friend, there's a lot going on here, and it gets resolved a bit quickly, Hannibal won't let anyone hurt Will and get away with it, Hannibal Loves Will, Will Loves Hannibal, and this time isn't even questioning it, sometimes you just need a ghost to play matchmaker
Language:	English
Series:	Part 12 of The Devil Wants His Due
Stats:	Published: 2019-03-18 Words: 11,949 Chapters: 1/1

Sell Your Soul to the Devil

by SingingInTheRaiin

Summary

Will goes to investigate who was responsible for allowing a riot to occur at the BSHCI, and might find his way towards the person who's been after him lately. Hannibal will figure out how to talk about his feelings. Jack will be Jack, but a bit happier than normal.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Will couldn't hide a slight shiver as he followed Jack through the doors into the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Jack peered back at him, looking almost amused. "What's wrong?"

Will shrugged. "I hate these places. Always afraid that they won't let me back out again."

"Don't worry, I wouldn't let you get locked up in there. I need you, remember?"

It was a less comforting thought than Jack seemed to think, since Will didn't enjoy the idea that he was only useful because of his empathy. He decided to change the topic, not wanting Jack to think he was upset with him. "So what are we doing here, anyways? I don't see any of the lab folk, and you didn't say anything on the phone other than that I needed to get here."

Jack sighed. "It's not our usual type of case. It wasn't some big public spectacle, but it's still a spectacle. Three nights ago, there was some kind of short circuit here, and an entire wing of patients were released from their cells. They were all eventually rounded up and put away again, but not before there were two casualties, one patient and one night guard, and several injuries."

Will furrowed his eyebrows. "And we were called in on this, why exactly? Sounds pretty straight-forward."

"It should be, but Dr. Chilton suspects that someone intentionally caused the short, but has no idea who would do it. The outside doors were still locked, and there was no way for the patients to even leave their wing, which would certainly make it odd if someone did do it on purpose. We're just supposed to take a look around and talk to a few employees, sniff out the situation. The Bureau does owe Chilton for what happened."

They signed in at the front doors, and were then buzzed in and led up to Chilton's office. He was sitting behind his desk, and looked up when the agents entered. There was a small smile on his face. "Ah, Jack Crawford, how lovely to see you again. And you must be Will Graham. You know, I've always wanted to meet you again. Your name is quite big in certain circles. I was quite fascinated to hear of you- though I must admit that I'm surprised to see you here, considering the fact that you aren't a real agent."

Will shifted uncomfortably on his feet. "You're looking pretty good for a guy who was shot in the face not too long ago," he deflected.

Chilton narrowed his eyes, but Jack quickly spoke in his no-nonsense voice before Chilton could kick them out. "You wanted us here, remember? So tell us why you think someone would set those patients partially free."

Chilton nodded towards the chairs across from his desk, and Will reluctantly followed Jack's lead in sitting down. "Well, whoever it is must love causing chaos. I have a strict screening process for all of my employees, but sometimes it can be difficult to tell what a person's true intentions are." He cleared his throat, and steepled his fingers together. "The wires were frayed, so at first I assumed that they'd gotten worn away. The maintenance crew would be in

trouble for allowing it to happen, but that would be the end of it. But the insurance required an investigation, and their woman said that the outer casing of the wire had been burned away, and that it had happened within days of the short. There's nothing that could have so thoroughly burned away such a small section of the wire, besides a lighter or a match. It would have kept the wire together just long enough that the short wouldn't happen immediately, so I suspect the culprit is someone who wasn't on shift that night. Here's a list of those employees. The names of the ones who were on shift is on a sticky note in one of those." He nodded towards a stack of folders, but didn't make any move to hand them over. "Two people are dead, and I am eager to figure out why."

Jack grabbed the folders when it was clear that Will wasn't going to reach out for them, and then he stood up and nodded once. "We'll look into these immediately."

Chilton nodded. "Good, good. This should be considered a top priority."

Will and Jack left the building, and Will turned to give Jack a look of disbelief. "This isn't really being considered a top priority, is it?"

Jack shrugged. "Like it or not, people did die. If someone allowed that to happen, then they need to be held responsible."

Will snorted, and started to walk away, but Jack reached out suddenly and pressed his hand against Will's chest. "Try not to cause me anymore headaches. Nobody likes Chilton, but stepping on his toes isn't going to accomplish anything."

Will rolled his eyes. "Fine." Then he headed towards his car so that he could follow Jack back to the BSU. When they got there, Jack shoved the file folders into Will's arms, and told him to look into them and let him know if there was anything useful to be found."

Will took in a deep breath, then let it out slowly so that he wouldn't snap at Jack about not just being a dog to be commanded. But he knew that he had to pick his battles, and this wasn't one he wanted to fight in, so he left to do what Jack asked. It's not like he had papers to grade or anything else to do with his time.

He paused mid-step when he rounded the corner to his office and saw Hannibal waiting on one of the uncomfortable wooden benches that lined the halls. He smiled when he saw Will, and stood up to greet him. "Good morning. You left so suddenly this morning, I wanted to make sure that everything was well."

Will narrowed his eyes and hurried forward, grabbing Hannibal's jacket to tug him into the office, and then closing the door behind him. "What the hell do you think you're doing here?" he hissed out. "Are you nuts? Jack Crawford wants your head on a platter, and flaunting yourself around in front of him is not going to make you look more endearing!" Then he realized how tightly he was gripping Hannibal's jacket, and forced his fingers to let go, hoping that the small wrinkle left behind wouldn't upset Hannibal too much.

Then he slowly looked up, and wasn't sure whether to feel relieved or not about the fact that Hannibal didn't look at all bothered. He brushed his hands down the front of himself, as if that would get rid of the wrinkles, and then gave Will a wide smile. "I am pleased to know

that you are so concerned about me. But I did not encounter Jack on my way here, so there is nothing to worry about."

Will sighed, and then tossed the folders down onto his desk without looking. "Well, you did come here while Jack and I were elsewhere, so I suppose if you had seen him in the hallways, I would be much more concerned." Then he crossed his arms over his chest and gave Hannibal an unamused look. "Why are you really here? You know that I left for work, so why would you be so worried?"

Hannibal looked amused, the bastard. "You're right, there was something specific I wanted to speak with you about. I'm referring to a few nights ago, when I brought dinner to your house. It would not be inaccurate to say that the evening grew tense after-"

There was a knock on the door, and Will decided that it was probably for the best. He had work to do anyways, and also thought that it was highly inappropriate for Hannibal to bring up mentions of murder and other such activities while literally standing right in an FBI building. He had to brush past Hannibal to get around him, since the man seemed content to just stand there in the middle of the small space instead of stepping aside.

Then Will opened the door, and knew that the look on his face had to be pretty awkward when he saw Alana standing there. He immediately moved to step out into the hallway and pull his office door closed behind him so that he could hide Hannibal from her. "Hey."

Alana arched one eyebrow. "You're not very subtle, Will. But alright, I won't ask what's in your office," she graciously told him. "Walk with me?"

Will nodded, relieved that he didn't have to listen to a confrontation between Hannibal and Alana, but then Hannibal stepped out into the hall himself, and Will squeezed his eyes shut as he sighed. "Is everything alright, Will?"

When Alana saw Hannibal, she immediately frowned. "Dr. Lecter."

"Dr. Bloom. It is always a treat to see you."

"You know, it's actually quite convenient that we've bumped into each other here. I've been meaning to find some time to talk with you."

"Oh?" Hannibal arched one eyebrow, and Will honestly wasn't sure if the man believed that anyone would fall for an innocent act like that. "And what is it that you were hoping to speak with me about? Perhaps some advice from your old mentor?"

Alana narrowed her eyes. "Not exactly. In fact, I was hoping to the be the one offering advice to you this time." She glanced at Will. "Would you mind giving us a moment?"

On the one hand, he didn't want to just leave Hannibal here at Alana's mercy. On the other hand, she was a stubborn woman and Will knew he had basically no chance to change her mind about having this conversation. And on the plus side, if he stepped back, neither of them would be able to pull him in. So he just nodded and shuffled away, turning the corner and then pressing himself up against the wall so that he could listen.

Though he should have known that Alana had more class than to have a discussion right out in the hallway where anyone could walk by. Once they'd headed off, Will returned to his office, and decided that he might as well get started at going through the files. It's not like there was anything for him to gain by putting the task off, even if it did seem a bit tedious.

He sat down at his desk, and then opened the folders to spread them all out in front of him. He glanced them over all individually first, and then went back to compare each one to the rest of them, to see if there were any that stood out as particularly distinct from the others. He wasn't sure what to look for, but if he could find a killer because of a lack of forwarding address on a resignation letter, then he was sure he could find something here with this wealth of information.

He kept shuffling through all of the files, trying to figure out which specific thing would prove to be the most important piece. After a few minutes, Will stopped and pulled one of the files out to put on top of the others. Something about it set off his instincts, but there was nothing in particular that should make it stand out. Nothing other than the employee's ID picture, anyways. Something about his grin was just somewhat unsettling. Though Will had to account for the fact that anyone willing to work at a place like the BSHCI probably had a thing or two off about them. It's not like it was a normal place to decide to work at.

Before Will could think about the off-putting profile, his door swung open without even a courtesy knock. Expecting to see a student, Will looked up to remind them that his office hours weren't until Wednesday, but it was Alana standing there instead, looking rather disgruntled. Since she would usually have the foresight to knock first, Will couldn't help feeling slightly concerned.

He quickly got up and looked her over to check for injuries, not putting anything past Hannibal. He wasn't able to spot anything, and Will wondered if Hannibal's new decision to not kill anymore included general physical harm towards others. It would certainly be nice if it did, but that wasn't the most important thing to think about at the moment. "Is everything alright?"

Alana narrowed her eyes. "That's not what I would call it."

But then she didn't say anything else, forcing Will to prompt her to continue. "What's wrong? Did Hannibal say anything too weird?"

Alana shook her head. "No. He acted and spoke like a perfect gentleman." Will continued to stare at her, waiting for her to explain what had upset her so much that she had abandoned Hannibal and then barged into Will's office like she owned the place. She sighed, and her shoulders slumped down. "Hannibal refuses to see how initiating a relationship with you is extremely inappropriate. And he also would not hear of the idea of transferring you to any of his well-respected colleagues if he is going to insist on continuing to see you. I don't like it, Will. You're not in a place right now where you should be-"

Will held up one hand to get Alana to stop talking. "I appreciate you wanting to look out for me, but I think that you're starting to get too involved in my love life. Me and Hannibal are two consenting adults who are not technically doctor and patient, and we enjoy spending time together. No one gets hurt from it, so what difference does it make?" Well, saying no one was

getting hurt was a bit difficult to justify, but Hannibal would have killed people regardless of whether or not he and Will were dating, so it didn't seem like that big of a lie.

Alana pressed her lips together into a flat line for a moment, and then finally responded. "No one's getting hurt, Will? I think that the fact you can't see blatant manipulation means that you're the one getting hurt, and I hate to see that happen to you. Please just let me-"

"I don't need your help with this, Alana," Will interrupted. "You're a good friend, and I love you for it, but I can take care of myself. I'm not some kid who needs to be constantly chaperoned." He didn't want to get too mean, but he also wanted Alana to just back off already, and he steeled himself for his next comment. "Are you sure that this has nothing to do with jealousy?"

The way Alana's face flushed with both anger and embarrassment was not something Will enjoyed being the cause of, but he'd rather cause Alana some hurt feelings than let her continue to get involved until she managed to annoy Hannibal enough that he would hurt her. He was pretty sure that that was something that would take a lot of time and effort, since Hannibal was already fond of Alana, but she was also very persistent, and he believed that she'd be able to do it. "I told you before, Will, that this has nothing to do with those kinds of feelings. You're my friend, and as such, I want to make sure that you're safe and comfortable."

Will sighed. "What about making sure that I'm happy? Being with Hannibal makes me happy. Is it really such a crime to just leave us be? Just because you can't get what you want doesn't mean that you have any right to stop anyone else from finding a little bit of happiness in a messed up world." He could feel Alana's anger radiating off of her in waves. Maybe this would have the dual effect of getting her off of Hannibal's back, while also breaking off her feelings for Will once and for all.

"You know what, Will? If you and Hannibal want to dance off into the sunset together, then I wish the best of luck to both of you." Then she turned to leave, walking slowly enough that she was giving Will plenty of time to call her back and apologize. But he remained silent, looking down at the floor as if he would somehow be able to find any answers there. This was for the best. Then Alana hesitated in the doorway, and peered back at Will over her shoulder. "I really do just want you to be happy, Will. If you need me for anything, you have my number."

Then she left, and Will sank back down into his seat, feeling like a shitty person. Somehow, attacking Alana like this felt a lot worse than handing over the names of people to Hannibal when he was well aware that it would get them brutally murdered.

Not long after she left, Hannibal returned, looking as unaffected as always. "You were right about Alana Bloom being on the warpath. She was quite persistent, but I'm sure you already knew as much. Tell me, where is she now?"

From the tone of his voice, it seemed pretty clear that Hannibal was well aware of what had happened, and had probably wanted such an outcome so that he wouldn't have to deal with Alana himself. "God, you're such an asshole."

“God has nothing to do with it,” Hannibal said in a light voice. “Would you care to take a lunch break, Will? It wouldn’t do to overwork yourself.”

Will shook his head. “No thanks. I’m way too busy. Why don’t you just go out on your own, and not come back here? I really don’t think that it’s safe for you to be walking around right in front of Jack. Even you can only do so much, especially when it comes to Jack.”

Hannibal tilted his head slightly to the side. “I’m detecting some hostility in your voice, Will.”

“This isn’t a therapy session,” he snapped. Then he let out a groan, and reached up to pull his glasses off and rub at his eyes. “I’m just really busy and I would appreciate it if you leave.”

Of course Hannibal remained put, looking like he was content to stand in Will’s cramped little office forever. “We never got the chance to discuss the reason behind me coming here today. I would still like to have that conversation with you.”

Will sighed. “I’m really busy right now. Later, okay? Bring dinner tonight to Wolf Trap and maybe I’ll consider letting you say your piece.”

It looked like Hannibal wanted to argue with the order, or maybe just the roughness of Will’s voice, but for once, he wisely chose to remain silent on the matter, and simply nodded once. “Very well then. I shall see you again tonight. And I do hope that you will be in a more pleasant mood by then.”

After he left, Will had to refrain from just banging his head against his desk in frustration a couple of times. But that wouldn’t help anybody, so he went back to shifting through the files, even though he was pretty sure he’d already settled on the idea that he knew which was the right one to be looking into.

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Will was exhausted, but he still had his dinner with Hannibal to look forward to, which almost seemed to work as motivation to get him to go out and do some on the ground investigation. There was no point in bothering Jack until he had a more solid lead than just that the guy’s face creeped him out, so he decided to head out for a quick impromptu interview.

He left a voicemail on Jack’s office phone to report where he was going, well aware that Jack only checked that phone once a day or so, and that no message would reach him nearly as quickly on there as it would on his cellphone. Will didn’t want to be an idiot who didn’t even consider the idea of bringing backup, but he also didn’t want Jack swooping in before Will even got the chance to try and figure things out on his own. This was the best way to accomplish both of those things.

When he got to the address that had been listed in the employee file, Will took in a deep breath before knocking against the apartment door. He’d gotten into the building by flashing his badge at the front door, but didn’t want to force his way into the suspect’s apartment if he

could avoid it, because he didn't want to do anything that would potentially invalidate any evidence he might find.

According to the man's file, he usually worked the night shift, which meant that hopefully he would be home right now. Though that did also bring up the question of why he hadn't been working the night of the escapes and rioting. Apparently he'd requested the night off months in advance, saying that he'd just be returning from a wedding and would be too tired to go to work.

Will knocked one more time when there was no answer, and then his shoulders slumped down as he turned to go, though he wasn't quite sure whether it was from relief or disappointment.

He took a step in the direction of the elevator, and then turned around when he heard the door behind him open up. If this was his only chance to talk to the man and see what was going on, then he wasn't going to waste it. "Matthew Brown? I just have a few questions about the incident in your workplace a few days ago…"

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Hannibal knocked on the front door of Will's house to be polite, though he wasn't surprised when there was no answer. He imagined that Will was busy, whether it was fixing some boat engine in the back, or making a new lure for his fishing, or getting drawn into a good novel with that little look of concentration on his face that Hannibal adored.

He grabbed the knob to push the door open and step in, but frowned when he found that it was locked. In the case of most people's homes that wouldn't be unusual at all, but Hannibal had gotten used to the fact that when Will was home, he left the door unlocked. It was only locked when he was away.

Though his car was in the driveway, because if it hadn't been, that would have been the first thing that Hannibal noticed. But the lights inside were all off, and when Hannibal pressed an ear against the door, he couldn't hear any of the enthusiastic barking that meant Will's pack was enjoying his company.

Memories of Sam fresh on his mind, Hannibal only took a few seconds to consider the pros and cons of this idea before taking a step back, and then kicking the door open. He'd never even bothered to get a spare copy of Will's key, because he only saw the point in showing up when he knew that Will was there, and the few times Will had begged him to dog sit, he'd loaned his only copy.

If it turned out that Will was just trying to ignore Hannibal and had gone to bed early, then he'd apologize and replace the door, but he wasn't going to apologize for the fact that he was concerned. Everything about Will made him Hannibal's perfect mate, and he would tear apart anyone who dared laid their hands on what wasn't theirs.

As soon as the door was open, Hannibal waited for the usual rush of dogs, but it never came, and that's when he knew that there was something more going on than Will acting a bit

childish. He hurried through the house, carefully searching each room for some clue about what had happened to Will and his dogs.

Then he went into Will's bedroom, and a scowl rose on his face at the sight that greeted him. There was Will, lying in his bed. His blankets had become an almost black color from all the blood soaked into them. And of course, it wasn't difficult to figure out the source of the blood when Will's head was resting several inches further up on the bed than the rest of his body.

There were signs of trauma beyond just the decapitation, though. It looked like someone had tortured him, though it was a clumsy attempt compared to how beautiful it had been to watch Will torture Sam. Hannibal sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed, unbothered by the blood staining his expensive pants. He reached up to stroke Will's hair, which was stiff from sweat and specks of dried blood. "You are a clever boy, but you seem to have an unbeatable talent for finding trouble."

Of course Hannibal wasn't just going to leave Will dead, despite the fact that it would probably make his own life much easier. It would mean skipping straight to the part where he spends eternity trying to convince Will that becoming his consort would be in his best interest. But Hannibal enjoyed playing at being human, at least for now, and didn't want to give that up so quickly.

He went about cleaning up Will's room, not wanting him to wake up in a pool of his own blood. Dying and coming back to life even once could be traumatizing enough, let alone several times, and he didn't need to give Will's nightmares any further ammunition against him.

Only once he was sure that the room was as spotless as it had been before- not that that was saying all that much- Hannibal sat on the bed next to Will's corpse, and closed his eyes for just a second.

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Will stomped around in his river, kicking up rocks and splashing around the water, and getting even more annoyed when the water refused to make him even the slightest bit damp. So then it wasn't just the whole world that was after him, but the whole afterlife as well? It just wasn't fair. Though Will did have to wonder if this was the universe's way of telling him that he was supposed to be dead and to just stop fighting it now.

When he'd first woken up here, for what felt like the thousandth time, Will had been understandably upset, but willing to sit around and wait for Hannibal to come get him. But even without any idea of just how much time had passed, Will knew that it had been too long, and that Hannibal wasn't coming from him. He'd probably finally figured out that Will was more trouble than he was worth, and had decided to just leave him here to rot.

But there wasn't much satisfaction in stomping on a river, especially when it was so obvious that it wasn't real, and Will decided that it was time to go exploring. Every time he'd come here in the past, he'd left fairly quickly, and it had never occurred to him that there could be any point in taking a look around.

Of course, there was the house right there, but Hannibal had already explained to him that the house was empty of anything but memories, and Will wasn't in the mood for re-living part of his childhood.

He turned in a slow circle, but every direction looked the same. Then he nodded once, and started walking, not having any idea of where he would end up. It seemed impossible that he was the only inhabitant of the after world, but even now he only had a very vague understanding of how that worked anyways, so maybe it was a possibility to consider.

It felt like Will had been wandering around for days before he was drawn to the sound of a soft barking. It wasn't any of his dogs, but any dog was a good dog, and it reinvigorated Will enough to get him to run towards the dog, hoping for the best. He kept going, grateful for the fact that he seemed to have an almost infinite amount of stamina in this place, and then finally stopped when he was suddenly standing on the sidewalk in a crowded city.

The serene forest he'd been in just a second ago was gone, and when Will turned around to look back, he could see nothing but more of the city. He took a few steps back the way he'd come, but he didn't appear back in the forest. Well, it was official, then, that Will had absolutely no idea what was going on.

He looked around in confusion, trying to figure out what city he was in. Definitely not Baltimore, or New Orleans, which were the two that he knew best. It wasn't New York or Boston, since he'd seen those in various movies and TV shows enough to recognize the basic landmarks in them.

He jumped back when someone reached out to touch his arm, and then Will looked at the culprit. It was an old woman with a lot of wrinkles on her face, and a crooked nose. She gave him a friendly smile. "You're new here, aren't you?"

Will hesitated for a moment, then nodded. He was new to this specific area, even if he wasn't new to being dead. "Where are we?"

"Oh, it's just the city. No one has any better of a name for it." She gave Will a long look. "You seem to be taking this rather well, all things considered. Where's your guide?"

Will blinked a couple of times. "My… guide? I'm sorry, but I just need to figure out how to get back to-"

The woman cut him off. "There is no going back. Once you're here, your dead dead. Of course there are all kinds of stories of people revived after dying, thanks to CPR or other resuscitation devices. My husband was one of them, when he had a heart attack. But he didn't come to the city. He was waiting in his childhood home all by himself, and then he was awake and alive again. Everyone starts somewhere else, where they wait in a sort of limbo. Once it's a sure fact that they're not going to stop being dead, they're guided here to the city. I've been a guide here for years now. Tell me, who is yours? They deserve a reprimand for leaving you on your own here. Did they at least help you find where you're going first?"

Will shook his head. "Uh- not exactly." From what he knew of Hannibal, he couldn't just be one of these guides. If they were dead dead then they wouldn't be able to come back to the

living world and change shapes and bring people back to life, and all the other things that Hannibal did. But it didn't matter anymore. If being here meant any chances of revival were gone, then didn't that prove it for sure that Hannibal was done with him?

He got the feeling that talking to this old woman was only going to make him feel worse about everything, so even though he knew that it was very rude to do so, Will abruptly stepped around her and began walking away. He didn't have a guide, but he'd figure things out without any assistance, just like he had to do with most things while he was still alive, too.

Everyone else looked like they were walking with a purpose, heading to somewhere that they knew they were supposed to be. Will wasn't sure where his place was around here, since he still didn't entirely understand what 'here' really was. He kept an eye out as he walked, until he spotted a pet store and veered off into it.

But the store was completely empty, with no furniture or people or pets. He left, and went directly into the shop next to it, and found the same thing. Will furrowed his eyebrows, and walked for a few more blocks before trying a small restaurant. But no matter where he went, nobody else was there. And when he looked at all of the people around him, he could see that none of them ever stopped walking to go into any buildings anywhere.

Will was just about to ask a stranger for help, when he noticed that that crowd was starting to split apart in a very even way, leaving plenty of space around a single person. Will tried to move closer, wondering who had caused the disruption, and saw someone who looked similar to Hannibal in his natural form, with the ink black skin and horns, and a nicely tailored suit to boot. But it definitely wasn't Hannibal. Will wasn't sure how he knew that, when the creatures looked so similar, but he just did.

Well, if Hannibal was some kind of upper management around here, then maybe it meant all of those things were. Probably easier to ask a higher up for help than some random person walking their way towards some unknown destination. He took a deep breath and was about to push through the crowd, when two arms wrapped around his chest and pulled him back, into a small alleyway. He struggled at first, until he heard Hannibal's familiar voice shushing him.

Once he'd calmed down, Hannibal let him go, and Will turned to face him. "Where the hell have you been?"

Hannibal pressed a finger to his lips. "Shh. You don't want anyone to know that you're here. You're very special Will, and your circumstances are quite unusual. I promise that I will explain it to you when we return, but right now we must leave."

Will nodded, and reached out to take one of Hannibal's hands in his own. He felt happy to know that Hannibal hadn't abandoned him after all, and he couldn't deny that he'd rather be alive than stuck here in this controlled looking confusion.

In a single step, they were suddenly standing back by the river that Will was getting sickeningly used to, and then in another step, everything was gone.

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Will blinked a couple of times as he woke up to the sight of his own bedroom in Wolf Trap. It was comforting. He reached up to feel at his neck, and there was a slight scar there that wrapped all the way around, though it was low enough down that it would be covered up by most shirts. Then he sat up when he realized that Hannibal had been lying down right next to him. “What’s going on?”

Hannibal sighed, probably hoping that Will would already forget his curiosity, but then he sat up as well. “This is a conversation best had over a good meal.” He led Will down to the kitchen, where he began pulling out ingredients from his usual cooler bag. “I cannot explain everything about the city, because human minds simply aren’t meant to comprehend such things. Perhaps someday, when you are my consort, you will be able to understand it all. For now, I will explain what I can.

“The place you usually go when you die can be thought of as a way station. Everyone’s final destination after death is the city, but because the city is kept secret, nobody's supposed to see it and live. So instead, everyone goes to a personalized way station until it is clear that they will not be returning to life. For some it’s a matter of minutes, while for others it can take years. Those way stations are connected to the world, though the city is not. It’s more inland.”

Will frowned. “This is all fascinating, and explains why you said I wouldn’t want to be caught in the city, but it doesn’t explain why you said that I’m special.”

Hannibal turned on the stove as he finished the basic prep he needed to do for the food. “I have brought you back to life several times now, Will. This is already the fourth time by my count. But such a thing should not be possible. Your first death was destructive enough that it should have sent you through to the city within minutes, but it did not. That is what initially caught my attention. Your second and third deaths were both possible to be revived from by natural means if there had been quick enough intervention. But this last one… decapitation has a zero percent survival rate. You should have gone straight to the city without any stops. And while I am grateful that that is not what happened, I can’t deny that I am curious about what makes you so different. And then there is the fact that you seem very emotionally healthy. Some people grow unstable after one revival. It is difficult to believe that you are able to remain so hale after four.”

Both of them were silent for a few minutes, before Will cleared his throat. “How did you get Jack to hand me over?” He wasn’t sure how he would play this one off. Last time he’d been left scarred and realistically injured. But there was no way he could have survived having his head chopped off so easily.

“Jack did not discover your body,” Hannibal informed him. “Your killer brought you here and tucked you into bed. I would be interested in hearing who did such a thing to you.”

Will looked down at his arms, which were perfectly smooth despite the injuries that he remembered receiving. “I was investigating into the matter of who caused a short circuit at the BSHCI that let patients wander around and kill someone. Chilton thought it had to be an employee, and when I was looking through the files, I got a weird feeling and I went to check

it out. He clearly hadn't been expecting me to show up, but took it like it was a great opportunity for him. He grabbed me, and did a lot of shit that I can barely even remember, I was so out of it at the time. I still don't even know why he wanted to cause a riot in the first place."

"A name," Hannibal reminded him in a firm, but gentle voice.

Will sighed. "Matthew Brown. He seemed to really hate me, but I did get a few good hits in, and I'm pretty sure that he's just human, so I don't know what was going on. He kept asking me about you, but I didn't say anything. It's not like I'd know what to really say even if I wanted to try talking. Well, at least I can hope he'll be freaked out when he sees me alive and walking around like nothing even happened."

When Hannibal set a plate down in front of him, he quickly began scarfing down the food. He wondered if dying and coming back to life was exhausting, or just the fact that there always seemed to be yet another person out to get him. Hannibal finished chewing, and then patted his napkin against his mouth before setting it down on the table. "What is on your mind, Will?"

He shrugged. "Not much. I was just wondering how different my life might be if I had never gone into law enforcement. Do you ever think about stuff like that? You did say that you weren't always a devil, right? So do you ever think about what life would be like if you'd never taken the job?"

Hannibal tilted his head. "On rare occasion. I prefer to look ahead, and appreciate what there is still left to see, rather than getting stuck on the past. Though there are times where I think of mistakes I have made, and I ask myself if I could have done anything differently to avoid losing my darling Mischa."

Will glanced down at his ring at the mention of Mischa. Only when talking about his sister did Hannibal ever sound so genuine in his emotions. "Is she in the city? Could you go see her there?" he asked hesitantly. He still didn't really understand how all the death stuff worked, but it seemed like maybe Hannibal would be less sad if he could go and visit his sister whenever he wanted to.

Hannibal shook his head. "There is no city for my kind of people. Once they are dead, that is the end of them, and they can only live on in memory."

"Well how do you know that if you haven't died yet?"

Hannibal snorted. "I know death, Will. It is quite literally my job to know all that there is to know about it."

They both sat there in silence before Will decided that there was no point in delving further into that particular topic, even though he didn't think that there was any real way to know for sure what happened after death for non-humans. "In the city, there was someone there who looked like you. The way you look when you're not looking like Hannibal Lecter. Does that mean that you guys both have the same job?"

Hannibal shook his head. “Not exactly. It is similar, but I suppose you could think of me as a supervisor to all of the others in the city. I am in charge of them.”

It seemed a bit odd that Hannibal would need to sneak Will away if he was the one in charge, but then he decided that there were more important things to focus on than just what the after life was like. He’d find out for himself eventually anyways, so there was no reason to try and learn all about it now. Instead, he just shrugged. “Well based on your house, I’d say that you’re paid well at least.”

They finished eating, and then Will helped Hannibal clean the dishes and put everything away. It didn’t escape his notice that some leftovers were slipped into his fridge, but he didn’t protest it, because even reheated, Hannibal’s cooking was a lot tastier than anything Will could put together on his own.

“I’m afraid I must take my leave now,” Hannibal said apologetically. “I have enjoyed seeing you, as always.”

Will arched one eyebrow. “So you’re just going to leave me here when you know that there’s a killer that knows where I live? Doesn’t sound like you.”

“Your killer has no reason to believe that you are still alive, so I do not think that he would return here. And I am sure that you will be more than capable of defending yourself now that you know to be on the lookout.” He kissed the top of Will’s curls, and then took his leave.

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As Hannibal drove to the home of one Matthew Brown, he had to stop himself from growling out loud at the thought of anyone touching Will- whether it was to harm him or bring him pleasure, it was just unacceptable. He didn’t want to go back on his decision to put killing on the back burner, but he did want destroy the man who’d dared hurt Will. Though he hadn’t said anything to Will, he was sure that his clever boy would figure out soon enough what Hannibal already had.

The man had put Will’s body in his own house, where no one other than Hannibal was likely to come across him. He’d also taken the dogs, possibly because he wasn’t sure how long it would take for the body to be discovered, and not wanting them to starve. And he’d been asking Will about Hannibal. He’d wanted Hannibal to find Will’s body. He’d wanted to stir up a confrontation.

He found the cheap looking apartment building easily enough, and hoped that no one would try stealing his car while he was inside. This didn’t look like the friendliest neighborhood, and considering what had happened to Will, it just seemed like proof that it wasn’t a safe place to be. Well, not for humans, anyways. Hannibal wasn’t worried about his own safety. The car, on the other hand…

Hannibal knocked politely on the door to Brown’s apartment, and didn’t have to wait long before it swung open, revealing a tall young man who was blearily reaching up to rub at his eyes. “What do you…” he trailed off as he took in the sight of Hannibal, and then his eyes

slowly widened in delight. “Dr. Lecter! I wasn’t expecting you to come all the way here just to see me. Please, come in, come in.”

His face was blank as he stepped into the apartment, closing and locking the door behind him as Brown ran off, rambling about needing to change into a clean pair of pants. Hannibal took the opportunity for a brief look around. It was a clean enough space, devoid of any personality or hominess.

Brown emerged from his bedroom, and he looked childishly excited to see Hannibal standing in the middle of his living room. “How did you find me? Ah who am I kidding, you’re plenty smart enough to put things together from all the trash I left for you.”

“Where are Will Graham’s dogs?” So far, Brown just seemed to be giving off an air of obedience. He’d wanted Hannibal’s attention, and he’d gotten it. Now the only question was why he’d wanted it at all.

Brown shrugged. “I dropped them off at a few different shelters around the state. Obviously it would be weird for seven dogs to all be dropped off at the same place.”

Hannibal arched one eyebrow as he thought of how annoying it would be to go around and collect all of the dogs again. He also knew that he would do it without any hesitation, because he knew how grateful Will would be to get his pack returned to him. And he did sometimes feel some small fondness for the beasts, if only because of the great joy that they brought to their master. “And what has you so eager to meet with me, Mr. Brown? I do have normal office hours if you wish to make an appointment.”

Brown crossed his arms over his chest, a small grin on his lips. “You’re a hawk, Dr. Lecter. Like me. Normally hawks are solitary creatures, but they also get caught too often. Even a hawk can’t beat an entire swarm of rodents. But just imagine all of the possibilities if we were to work together. We’d be unstoppable.”

“And what makes you so sure that I am a hawk? I have been feeling rather dove-like as of late.”

The smirk on Brown’s face was quite unattractive, and Hannibal idly wondered if he had any good recipes for lips. “I happened to be in a very nice neighborhood some weeks back, and I happened to follow you past a very nice bus depot.” Hannibal nodded once. He had not been expecting Sam to cause so much trouble even after his death. “And I saw that little rat there, too. He’s pretty, I’ll give him that, but you’re not someone who would be so easily swayed by good looks. I figured that there must be some merits to him, and when I looked him up, I found all kinds of information. You only liked him because you thought he’d be the only one who could understand you, right? But that isn’t the truth. I understand you, Dr. Lecter. And I proved my superiority by defeating him. And by killing him, I gain part of who he was, and I can understand you even better.” His eyes were shining, and just talking about the victory seemed to get him going.

There was no way that Hannibal could allow this insignificant worm of a man to live, not after what he’d done. And now that he knew the fates of Will’s dogs, there was no other reason to keep Brown alive for even a second longer.

Then his cell phone rang with the ring tone set to tell him that it was Will calling, and he knew he had to answer it. “If you’d excuse me for a minute,” he said before stepping out into the hallway of the apartment building. “Is everything alright, beloved?”

Will laughed in that awkward way of his. “Ah, sorry to bother you like this when we just saw each other, and I know that you’re probably in the middle of killing Matthew Brown or something, so I’ll be brief. Is there an off button on this thing?”

Hannibal blinked a couple of times. Will had given him Brown’s name knowing that it would most likely lead to the man’s death? And he sounded entirely unbothered by the idea of Hannibal committing a murder. Perhaps he had been too hasty in his decision to stop killing, as an appeasement tactic. But he could think more on that later. “What thing?”

“The ring,” Will huffed out. “You know, the piece of jewelry that you magically super glued to my finger? I just need to know how to turn the damn thing off, and then I’ll leave you be.”

Hannibal furrowed his eyebrows as Will let out a sudden grunt of exertion. “I’m sorry, but I really have no idea what you are talking about. What exactly is going on?” He’d had Mischa’s wedding ring in his possession for more years than the average human being was capable of comprehending, and it had never been anything other than a ring. Of course he’d added his own little embellishments before handing it over to Will, but he couldn’t imagine Will sounding so stressed just about the fact that the ring had become a permanent attachment.

Will sighed loudly, and over the phone the noise sounded like a gust of wind. “You seriously don’t know what’s going on right now?” Hannibal made a small noise of agreement, and then Will sounded more tired than anything as he responded. “I think that this ring is haunted or something. It just started glowing out of nowhere and now I’m pretty sure that there’s a ghost trashing my house. Are ghosts even real? I don’t think I’d be surprised either way at this point.”

“I’ve never seen a ghost before,” Hannibal started slowly. “People are either dead or alive. They cannot exist in a state that is simultaneously both and neither. Find somewhere safe, and I promise that I will be there soon.”

Will sighed again. “I should have known that there wouldn’t be an easy fix to this. But I can hold my own for now. She only seems to be ruining the furniture, but she hasn’t even looked my way once since appearing. Feel free to finish up whatever you were working on before coming here. See you soon.” Then he hung up abruptly.

After taking a moment to try and figure out what trouble Will could have possibly stumbled his way into this time, he went back inside Brown’s apartment. “I’m sorry, that was terribly rude of me. Where were we?”

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Will could hear the crashing noises in the background as that ghost- or whatever the hell is was- threw around his stuff and smashed it all up. Though at this point, she’d pretty much run

out of ammunition, and seemed to just be stomping around on the crushed remains of the stuff she'd broken.

Whether or not she was capable of going through walls, she seemed to respect the door that Will had carefully closed between them, so he was taking the time to work on one of his lures. It's not like there was much else better to do while waiting out a ghostly rampage like this.

He wasn't sure of how much time had passed before he got a phone call from Hannibal letting him know that he'd be there soon. Knowing that Hannibal was on the way served as a bit of a confidence booster for Will, and he slipped his phone into his pocket before opening the door to the bathroom where he'd been hiding out, making lures that he'd managed to grab and bring in with him.

He looked around cautiously, and then heard a soft bang from upstairs, so he rushed into the kitchen to grab his biggest knife before going up to investigate. If millions of movies and books and television shows were anything to go by, this knife would be completely useless, but it served to make Will feel safer, and that was what mattered most.

It didn't take him long to follow the sound of disturbances into his own bedroom, where the ghost was lying down on his bed, throwing a small ball up high enough to hit the ceiling, and then easily catching it in her hand before tossing it up again. Now that he was here, though, he wasn't sure what to do. Was there a list of things that were appropriate to say to a ghost? Was he just supposed to wing it? Would he have been better off leaving and hoping for the best?

Before he could think of what it was he wanted to say, exactly, the young looking woman suddenly bolted upright and turned to face Will, though she remained on his bed. She gave him a long, searching look, and then nodded towards his hand. "Where did you get that?"

"Hannibal gave it to me," Will muttered. "Does that mean- are you Mischa, by any chance?"

There was only a vague resemblance between her and Hannibal, but that was still enough to make the connection that they might be related. Mischa didn't seem too surprised by Will's question, and she just nodded once. "Yes. And who are you? You must be something quite special for Hannibal to hand over my ring so easily."

Will gulped, and wondered if he was about to get the shovel talk from a ghost. "I'm Will Graham." Obviously she would have no idea what that actually meant or who he was, but he wasn't really sure what to say in this situation. Maybe this is why he'd never passed the exam for becoming an FBI agent. Because he couldn't think on his feet while enough when talking to a ghost thing of his lover's dead sister. Christ.

Mischa smiled at his awkwardness, though, so maybe it wasn't as bad as he thought. Or worse, maybe she felt sorry for him because he was such an odd excuse for a human being. "Based on the fact that you know who I am, and that he gave you that ring at all, it seems as though I can't possibly believe anything other than that he truly loves you."
Will could feel his face heating up a bit, and wanted to move onto a less embarrassing topic. "How are you even here? And, uh, why did you tear apart my house?"

Mischa sighed. “I’m not sure how I’m here right now, to be honest. Such a thing has never happened before, at least not that I’m aware of. And I am sorry about your house. It was just so unsettling to suddenly be here after being elsewhere for so long, and I was disoriented and angry and I shouldn’t have acted so destructively. Though it sounds like Hannibal will take care of you and make sure that everything gets all properly fixed up, brother,” she added with a wry grin.

Will’s face definitely had to be red by now, and he was glad that he hadn’t shaved in a few days so that there would be scruff to hide behind. “Did you just call me your brother?”

Mischa nodded, still grinning. “Yup. If you’re married to my brother, then that makes you my brother as well.”

“I’m not married to Hannibal!” Will blurted out. “For the last time already, I don’t want to be his consort.”

Mischa’s eyes widened. “He asked you to be his consort?” For some reason, that seemed to shock her more than her playful joke about him being married to Hannibal.

Will gave her a slightly confused look at the sudden change in attitude. “Yes…? Isn’t that what you were just laughing at me about?”

She quickly shook her head. “No, I was thinking that you were married in a normal way. It had never occurred to me that my dearest brother would ever find someone he thought was truly worthy of being his consort. It’s about something far more than just sleeping together. It’s about being equals, and ruling by his side for an eternity. Do you even begin to realize what must go into a decision like that? It means that he must trust you unequivocally, and have complete faith in you.”

Will tilted his head as he processed that. “Wait, how do you know what it would mean? I thought Hannibal said that you died because of something he did to get to where he is now, so wouldn’t that make you completely unaware of everything involved in his current position?”

Mischa frowned, and stood up, and Will realized that even with her feet planted firmly on the ground, she was still about an inch taller than him, which put her around the same height as Hannibal. Will couldn’t stop himself from glancing at her hands to see if her fingers really were the same size as his, but they definitely were daintier, which meant Hannibal had to have resized the ring before giving it away.

Then he focused back on Mischa’s face so that she’d know he was paying attention to the conversation. “I’m afraid that our family drama is rather more complicated than I’m sure Hannibal made it out to be. He has a tendency to take on more guilt than he is due. He and my husband were both conspirators working together to kill off the person who previously held the job that Hannibal has now. Hannibal was always in the death industry, since that’s literally what our kind was created to do, but he was on a much lower rung of the corporate ladder, bringing souls to their way stations. It was tedious work and he hated it, and had many ideas for reinventing the whole process. He couldn’t even get a single meeting with his direct boss, let alone the boss of everything. My husband was a secretary for a higher level worker, and he liked Hannibal’s ideas. He tried to convince his boss to go through with them, but it

didn't work and he was fired for interfering. That's when he and Hannibal decided to work together.

"Our kind may be the masters of death, but we are not infallible ourselves. Hannibal and Ari, my husband, figured out how to kill the man in charge of everything. Hannibal immediately seized power and began restructuring. There were many who did not approve of his changes, especially those who were ousted from their positions of power. They knew that they would not be able to kill Hannibal- he was far too strong and clever to leave himself the same weaknesses as the previous boss- so they went after Ari and I instead. Hannibal had tried to convince us both to take higher up positions, but we had refused and insisted on earning our ways through the ranks. It meant that we were much weaker targets, and Hannibal's enemies went after us instead."

Will frowned. There were a million different questions he wanted to ask, like who's idea it had been to make death into a bureaucracy, but those weren't the most important questions at the moment. "But if you were killed, then how are you here right now?"

"I would like to know the same thing, myself," Hannibal's voice suddenly spoke up from behind them. Will glanced back to see Hannibal standing in the doorway to the bedroom, his eyes wide as he stared at the specter of his sister. "I saw your body torn to shreds," he said softly. "This seems as though it should be entirely impossible."

Mischa hurried over to Hannibal to pull him into a hug. "Brother!" They hugged for several long seconds before she pulled away a bit, though it looked as though Hannibal wanted to follow her and continue the hug. He'd never seen Hannibal act so affectionate towards anyone. Never seen him look so… human. There was a thoughtful look on Mischa's face as she regarded Hannibal carefully. "You saw my body, but did you see my essence?"

Hannibal shook his head slowly. "No. Ari and Lukas and Azuolus, but not yours. I had always assumed that I had simply missed it, that I had gotten there too late." He blinked a few times, and then his eyes drifted over to Will. "Are you alright? It looks as though a small hurricane swept through the lower floor of your house."

Will nodded. "Fine."

Mischa walked over to Will to grab at his hand and hold it up, showing off the ring that was stuck there. "Perhaps my essence was trapped in this trinket, as it was always so important to me. And then when you brought it here to the living world…" she trailed off, looking a bit frustrated as she dropped Will's hands. "I have no idea how this is possible, to be perfectly honest."

"You might be on to something. Will died and went to the city while wearing your ring. Which means that it was forced to exist simultaneously in this world and in the world of the dead. That much stress on a simple piece of metal may have stretched it enough to set your essence free."

Both of them looked lost in thought as they contemplated Hannibal's words. Will wasn't really sure what to make of any of it, but he was well aware that this was all far above his

head. Without saying a word, he walked past the siblings to head downstairs, hoping that some of his liquor had survived Mischa's show of force.

He pried open the cabinet in the kitchen where he kept most of his cleaning surprise, and rummaged around until his hands wrapped around the solid glass neck of a bottle that had been hidden away back there. It had been a present from Hannibal at one point, before Will knew that he was more than just a psychiatrist, and Will hadn't been sure what to do with it. Leaving it on display would make it look as though it had been a meaningful gift, but it had looked too good to waste, so he'd stashed it. Now he was grateful for that decision.

He set it down on the counter and tried to find a glass, but all he found were shards, and was careful to avoid getting more than a few scratches. After a moment, he shrugged and decided that he could just drink out of the glass. He was sure that Hannibal would judge him for it despite the circumstances, but he wasn't really in the mood to care about something like that, at least not at the moment.

After taking a couple of swallows, Will made his way into the living room. His couch had been torn up, but he sat down anyways. It's not like it had been amazingly comfortable even before these unasked for modifications for it.

Just a few minutes later, Hannibal walked into the living room, and stood near the couch, though he didn't sit down after shooting it a single distasteful look. Mischa was right behind him, an apologetic look on her face. "Sorry again about all of this stuff. Just send Hannibal the bill and I'll make sure that he pays it."

Will nodded. "Sure." Then he looked at Hannibal and took another swallow before speaking. "So how did you resolve things with Matthew Brown?"

"I believe that he was responsible for sending Randall Tier your way, as well as killing you himself. For that, he will not be a problem any longer."

Will sighed and leaned back against the couch. "So much for not killing anymore, huh?"

Hannibal hesitated for a moment before answering. "You may tell me if you believe that I am out of line for saying so, but I can't help but think that you were almost disappointed when I told you that I no longer planned on killing."

It didn't even bother Will that Hannibal's sister was right there to witness their drama, but then again, this was a pretty darn good drink. "I don't care about the killing," he started, and then immediately stopped when he realized how that must sound. "I mean- I don't want you killing people but that's not why I-"

Mischa was suddenly standing right next to him, and while it was a little bit unnerving, he found that he wasn't as freaked out as he had the right to be, all things considered. She reached out to hold both of his hands. "Just be honest. My brother is a total freak when it comes to understanding feelings, so you have to be up front with him if you want him to know what's up."

Hannibal let out a small noise of protest, but he didn't actually seem too bothered by his sister's analysis of him. Will sighed, and nodded appreciatively before looking at Hannibal. "I know this is going to make me sound ridiculous, but when you said that you get bored of everything eventually, I figured that that would include me."

There was silence for a moment, and the Mischa looked over at her brother disapprovingly. "Hannibal! You suck at being romantic if you let your partner feel like that! You're just too hopeless without me, aren't you?"

Hannibal gave his sister a slightly exasperated look, and then knelt down to the floor in front of Will. "I'm very sorry that you feel that way, beloved, but I can assure you that it would be impossible to ever grow bored of you. You are everything I could ever wish for in a mate, and you are always surprising me. You are perfect for me, and I could never be happy with another person the way that I am with you."

Will gulped past the sudden lump in his throat. "Oh."

Hannibal gently knocked Mischa aside so that he could hold Will's hands himself. "Knowing everything that you do now, I feel it is appropriate to ask you again. Will you be my consort, Will?"

Will looked into Hannibal's eyes, and even though he'd always had trouble getting a read on the man, he knew that right now, Hannibal meant everything that he was saying. Will gulped again, and then nodded once. "Sure, why not?" he whispered.

Hannibal grinned, and leaned forward to kiss him, and would have kept going if Mischa had not made a slight noise of disgust at the sight. "You are perfect, Will. On top of everything else, you have also managed to give me back my precious sister. Every time I learn something new about you, I find myself in further awe of lucky I was to ever meet you."

"You can even keep the ring," Mischa told him with a small laugh. "I wouldn't want it back with all the love that Hannibal's surely imbued in it by now."

Will pulled Hannibal into a hug and gave him another kiss. "I love you," he said very quietly. And this time he didn't overthink it, and start to worry that it had merely been a slip of the tongue. There was no point in getting so worked up over a simple statement of the truth, after all.

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Jack walked into his office on Friday morning to the sight of his phone blinking, which meant that he had a voicemail. It couldn't have been anything too urgent, though, because if it was then he would have been called on his cell phone. He hung up his jacket and settled in for the day before sitting down and hitting play. Then he leaned back in his seat to listen to the messages that had been left for him.

Three new voice messages. Tuesday, 9:07 pm, 'Hey Jack, this is Denean Elbez from the support group. I just wanted to say congratulations! You must be so happy, and I know that the rest of us here certainly are. I know that remission isn't the same as being cured, but it's

still incredible news, and I think that Bella is going to be just fine. And of course, you're both still welcome at the group if you ever just need to talk. See you soon!' Jack grinned to himself as he thought of how much celebrating had been going on the past couple of days. Everyone had been so sure Bella was going to die, but then she'd pulled through and woken up one day without the cancer, and it was the happiest that Jack had been in a very long time.

Monday, 12:41 pm, 'Agent Crawford, this is Freddie Lounds. I have no idea how you've managed to make these charges stick, but rest assured that I am going to get out of this, and then the whole world is going to know what a corrupt organization you are running!' Jack hadn't even been aware that Lounds had been arrested, but it was certainly a nice thing to hear first thing in the morning.

Friday, 2:34 am, 'Hey Jack, it's Will. Uh, I know you'd probably appreciate all this more if I could tell you to your face, but this is the best I can do. I plan on leaving soon. Like, tonight soon. I've never really been happy with my life, like there's always been something missing, but I could never figure out exactly what it was. I'm not going to say that it's something as sappy as love or friendship or connection. But maybe purpose? Something more than just going in whatever direction you point like I'm some kind of guard dog. Ah, despite how that sounded, this is really nothing against you. I need to move on with my life, Jack. And I deserve to be happy. So I'm heading out. You probably won't be hearing from me again for a long time. My dogs have already been placed in good shelters, so I don't need anyone to watch over them, and I've already left a message for Alana. What else, what else… oh, and there's a stack of graded papers on my office desk, so if you could make sure that my students get those back, I would really appreciate it.

'Anyways, I am grateful for everything you've done for me, Jack. You went out on a limb to bring me onto your team, and you let me feel like I was really doing something to help people. And you inadvertently led me to finding myself, even though I know that that's not something you had intended. I don't want you to think that I don't care about what you've done for me, because I do. And I wish you the best in life, Jack. I hope that you find your white whale someday, but even more importantly, I hope that maybe you won't need to keep looking for it. Have a good life, Jack. Don't worry about me, because I'll be just fine. Probably more fine than I have been in a very long time, in fact. Goodbye, Jack.'

End Notes

And this is it! We're finally at the end of the story here, folks, and thank you so much to everyone who has been following along since the beginning! This is one of those things that I had never intended to go further than a single one shot, so I'm surprised with myself to see it go this far, but I'm glad that I kept going with this!

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